# UNCOMMON AIRMEN

## *Airmen-Soldiers are a direct link between ground and air power*

by Rich Lamance
opening photo by Tech. Sgt. Larry A. Simmons

It wasn't only the 70-pound rucksack, M-4 rifle and 9 mm pistol that slowed Tech. Sgt. Shane Palmer to a crawl as he maneuvered through the tight alleys and densely clustered concrete houses. Constant mortar fire, random artillery shells and rocket-propelled grenade attacks made forward progress almost impossible.

Sergeant Palmer and his Army infantry unit were in a battle between the Mahdi army of militant cleric Maqtada al Sadr in the Iraqi city of Najaf, and Marines and Soldiers in the late summer of 2004. Sandwiched between one of the world's largest cemeteries and one of Islam's holiest sites, the gold-domed Imam Ali Shrine, the Americans were in the difficult position of finding a way to stop the enemy without damaging the sacred landmark.

But on this day it would be Sergeant Palmer, and a handful like him, who would make the difference between mission success and failure. A 500-pound bomb expertly placed from above onto a Mahdi mortar position silenced the enemy, while leaving the shrine intact.

Sergeant Palmer is no ordinary Airman. A joint terminal attack

***Diving for cover** is something joint terminal attack controllers Senior Airman Joshua Issermoyer (left) and Staff Sgt. Francis Lott III do often while training at Fort Hood, Texas. The 3rd Air Support Operations Group Airmen work to provide close-air support for the more than 35,000 Soldiers of the 1st Cavalry and 4th Infantry divisions.*

by Tech. Sgt. Larry A. Simmons

***"Prepping the battlefield"*** *is what joint terminal attack controllers call verifying and prioritizing targets on the battlefield. Senior Airman (now staff sergeant) Daniel Nestor (left) and Senior Airman Jayson McCoy prep many battlefields during training at Fort Hood, Texas. Here they simulate calling in airstrikes by a variety of U.S. military aircraft to help Soldiers on the ground.*

by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio M. Ricardo Jr.

***Donning battle armor*** *before a mission in Baghdad, Iraq, is a familiar routine for Senior Airman Dan Strom. The joint terminal attack controller calls in and directs close-air support missions for Soldiers when they clear insurgents from areas of the city.*

controller, or JTAC, his job on the battlefield is to communicate the needs of the ground commander to the pilots whose job it is to put bombs on target.

At sprawling Fort Hood, an Army post situated among the expansive buttes and sporadic mesquites just north of the Texas Hill Country, Sergeant Palmer is one of about 300 tactical air control party, or TACP, Airmen. They work with about 35,000 combat arms Soldiers of the 1st Cavalry and 4th Infantry divisions. The Airmen represent about a fifth of the Air Force's 1,500 or so TACPs.

As a part of the 3rd Air Support Operations Group, these tactical Airmen find themselves in a world outside the realm of the Air Force, and not quite accepted by the Army.

"These guys are truly the unsung heroes," group deputy commander Lt. Col. Michael Dennis said. "The Army doesn't realize they're there. The Air Force doesn't realize they're there.

"Their bond with their squadron mates and the bond with their Army partners is something you only read about in literature," the colonel said. "These guys are out six months in Iraq, six months home, then six months back in Iraq. They simply put on their rucksacks and they go out there and do their missions."

Those missions are in the hands of five operational units — the 11th, 9th and 712th air support operations squadrons at Fort Hood, and the 10th and 13th air support operations squadrons at Fort Riley, Kan., and Fort Carson, Colo., respectively. This group of about 500 Airmen includes not only TACPs and JTACs, but everyone from communications maintenance experts to vehicle maintainers, administrators and officers who act as air liaison officers at the brigade, division and corps levels. Each unit is responsible for supporting designated Army units.

"Each division has a squadron commander and staff aligned with division headquarters," the group's operations director, Lt. Col. David Staven, said. "Then there are flights within each squadron aligned with the various combat brigades within the division. Broken down within each flight, you have elements of TACPs who work with the various battalions."

Colonel Staven said TACPs can be found in the fight all the way down to the company level where the Airmen live, eat, sleep and fight with their Army unit at some of the most remote forward operating bases in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's not uncommon to see Airmen alongside combat teams perform cordon searches, work convoy missions or monitor unmanned aerial vehicle flights during combat operations.

The TACP at his most basic level is the ROMAD, or radio operator maintainer and driver. While the role of Airmen controlling the skies from the ground dates as far back as World War II, today's ROMAD uses satellite and digital communications to make that job quicker and greatly reduce the chances of fratricide, or "friendly fire."

"As a ROMAD, I have to know each radio's capability and be able to program the frequencies to effectively communicate between the aircraft and the combat commander on the ground," said Senior Airman Jayson McCoy, a TACP with the 11th ASOS.

"I have to be familiar with a variety of computer systems, targeting systems and other equipment to put bombs on target. I'm also expected to shoot while under fire, know how to clear a building and learn hand-to-hand combat," he said.

The evolution of the TACP is to become a JTAC. This supercharged TACP is the one who communicates with pilots and the only one of a two-man team allowed to actually "control the air."

"The road to becoming a JTAC starts the day a TACP gets to his first assignment after tech (technical) school," said Staff Sgt. James Barker, a JTAC with the 11th ASOS. "You're tested on equipment and you need a year of mission-ready status before you can start JTAC upgrade."

The sergeant said the first phase of training, for airmen first class, lasts about six months.

"During that time, you need four simulator controls, four real-world controls and a whole table of training," Sergeant Barker said. "Once you go through those requirements, and make senior airman, then you're ready for the school."

The school is a three-week qualification course at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. Students get four more control missions and learn more about how to work with Army units.

"They guide you on the different ways to talk to the aircraft," Sergeant Barker said. "Then, when you get back to your unit, you have four more controls and another table of training. A year-and-a-half later, a TACP will get his evaluation to be a JTAC."

But working with satellite communications and using complex controlling procedures is only the beginning of training required of the Fort Hood TACPs and JTACs. They often insert themselves into military operations on urban terrain training where they learn to kick in doors and clear an urban area of insurgents. At times, the Airmen host Army weapons teams that provide more in-depth training on the 9 mm pistol and M-4 rifles. Other times, the teams find themselves integrated with Army units in the field to learn how to interact.

Like their Army counterparts, TACPs begin each morning with physical training as a group, usually starting with push-ups and calisthenics and ending with a four-mile run.

"On the days we don't do PT, we usually put on 70-pound rucksacks and march for about four miles or so," said Staff Sgt. David Galindo, a JTAC with the 9th ASOS at West Fort Hood, an annex to the main post.

"Most of our missions at Fort Hood involve training," Sergeant Galindo added. "We train on small-arms tactics, patrol procedures, radio and telecommunications procedures and close-air-support planning and execution. A good close-air-support mission can take a whole day to plan. Nothing beats watching an A-10 (Thunderbolt II) unload 30 mm rounds into a target when I'm less than a kilometer away."

Outside of actual combat deployment, the most intensive training for TACPs is among the treacherous ravines and desolate terrain of the Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. In this realistic setting in the Mojave Desert, Airmen and Soldiers face situations they're likely to face in combat and work through issues before they get to the actual battlefield.

"Our part was to get involved with convoy operations where we have aircraft scan the road ahead for stopped vehicles, potential hazards or explosive devices," said Senior Airman Martin Coulombe, a TACP with the 11th ASOS. "We go into town, knock down doors and clear areas with our Army counterparts, all the while keeping in touch with aircraft to keep things safe."

The training helps prepare the Airmen. But tales of combat experiences abound in the group, since its TACPs deploy to hotspots in Iraq and Afghanistan on an average of every six months.

Master Sgt. Shawn Williams, a tactical air command and control superintendent with the 11th ASOS, said TACPs provide direct control to aircraft or pilots. They also provide expert advice to Army ground commanders in the fight.

"If there are Soldiers walking the mountains of Afghanistan, you better believe there is a TACP with them," he said. "If there is a major operation in Baghdad, you better believe TACPs are involved."

JTAC Staff Sgt. Brian Tatum has deployed with Green Berets and 1st Cavalry Division units in Iraq and Afghanistan, He has seen first hand the importance of the Air Force in the fight.

"I provided close-air support throughout the battlefield in situations where our own firepower could no longer save us. At that point, I would bring in aircraft to drop bombs on enemy targets without any 'friendly' casualties," he said.

Senior Airman Riley Clark, a TACP with the 11th ASOS, served in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and other spots in Southwest Asia during his four-year career. The Air Force's role in combat operations is vital, he said. Controllers call in air strikes from A-10 Thunderbolt II, F-15 Eagles, F-16 Fighting Falcons and Navy F-18 Hornets; B-1 Lancer, B-2 Spirit and B-52 Stratofortress bombers; and attack helicopters.

"TACPs are the most destructive men on the battlefield," Airman Riley said.

Sergeant Tatum and other TACPs are often the stereotype of Airmen in the field and can give examples of living and working in conditions few Airmen or Soldiers ever experience.

"I remember a battle in Iraq where I didn't get a shower for 30 days," Sergeant Tatum said.

When the Airmen go on patrols "outside the wire" — off a post or base — with Soldiers, they usually work out of a Humvee. They carry their rucksack, body armor, Kevlar helmet, M-4 rifle, 9 mm pistol and radios.

"We'll dismount with the Army when they go on patrols. We work with squads of 10 to 15 Soldiers," Airman Coulombe said. "We have to constantly be on the lookout. When I'm on patrol, I'm with my JTAC and my job is to watch his back while he's controlling aircraft."

Constant training, frequent temporary duty and lengthy deployments make life stressful for the Airmen. Adding to the stress: The closest Air Force base is three hours away at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. Most families rarely get the chance to experience true Air Force culture.

"If we were at an Air Force base, my wife would expect Airmen to look, and act, like a TACP," Sergeant Barker said. "She's never been around an Air Force base and typical Air Force people. Army life is all she knows."

Airman Coulombe tries to keep "the bad stuff" about what he does from his family.

"I've found that when we're deployed, and on a combat mission, we have to shut everything else out. When we get back home, we have to block out everything we went through. And, even when you're not happy, you act happy, because you don't get much time with your family."

The Airmen who work with the controllers return to the Air Force after their Fort Hood stint. But controllers know their next post is with an Army combat unit, like at Vicenza, Italy; Fort Drum, N.Y.; Fort Stewart, Ga.; Fort Richardson, Alaska; or Camp Casey, South Korea.

For these warfighters who wear Air Force blue, home is where the next action takes them.

# FORT HOOD TACPS TOPS IN AIR FORCE

When the Air Force presented the first-ever awards honoring the best Airmen in the tactical air control party career field, it was no coincidence the top winners were from the same group.

by Tech. Sgt. Larry A. Simmons

***Passing coordinates** for airstrikes to aircraft overhead is one of the key missions joint terminal attack controller Staff Sgt. Francis Lott III has on the battlefield.*

Staff Sgt. Christopher P. Avalos, Staff Sgt. Francis E. Lott III and Senior Airman Andre Andrews are with the 3rd Air Support Operations Group at Fort Hood, Texas. The group works with two divisions of about 35,000 Soldiers.

That means the Airmen train, live, eat, sleep and go to war with the Soldiers they work along side.

Airman Andrews received the Raymond Losano TACP Award, named after a TACP killed in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom. It recognizes the outstanding TACP apprentice or journeyman ranked senior airman or below.

While in Afghanistan, Airman Andrews fought off several enemy combatants following the crash of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter. He called in air support, saving 12 lives in the process.

"My JTAC (joint terminal attack controller) went out with our company commander because intelligence (analysts were) telling us that there were people watching us," said Airman Andrews, a TACP with the 9th Air Support Operations Squadron.

"The Army found out where the guys were and started firing mortar rounds at them. We watched them go in, but from where the JTAC was, he couldn't communicate back to the guys who were firing the mortars to allow them to make the adjustments," the Airman said. "The JTAC would tell the B-1 pilot, the pilot would tell me and I would switch over my frequency and tell the Army guys the adjustments."

Scenes like this were typical for the young Airman who spent nearly eight months working with Army division and brigade combat teams.

Sergeant Avalos, a fighter duty technician, received the Fighter Duty Technician Award for his actions in Afghanistan. The award recognizes the achievements of Airmen below the rank of master sergeant who have at least one year in the field, a deployment to an air support operations center for five months or more and their combat mission-ready certification.

In Afghanistan, the sergeant from the 712th ASOS controlled more than 2,000 hours of close-air, electronic warfare and armed reconnaissance support missions to ground units.

"When JTACs are in the muck and they have a request for air, they call us," Sergeant Avalos said. "We're basically a 9-1-1 dispatch center. We find the coordinates and appropriate munitions and get the pilot in touch with the JTAC as quickly as possible."

No rookie to this kind of work, Sergeant Avalos has been in the TACP field for 15 years, 11 of them as a fighter duty technician.

"I don't feel that anything I did was out of the ordinary," said Sergeant Lott, an 11th ASOS joint tactical air controller. He received the Jacob P. Frazier TACP-JTAC Award, given to the TACP of the year.

The sergeant controlled 556 combat sorties in Iraq. This resulted in the capture of 170 anti-Iraqi forces and helped clear more than 2,230 miles of road. He also helped train 40 Iraqi police. These are some reasons Sergeant Lott received the award named after a JTAC killed in action.

Sergeant Lott, a five and one-half year veteran, said his biggest challenge is training and fighting — and being accepted — in an Army world, while wearing an Air Force uniform.

"You have TACPs and pararescue jumpers on the frontlines with the Army, but who constantly have to prove themselves. Some Army guys don't know who or what TACPs are," Sergeant Lott said. "You have to constantly show what you bring to the fight. But once you do, the relationship becomes very strong."

That makes for a better team on the battlefield. But it can be confusing at other times.

"I know more about the Army than I do the Air Force," Sergeant Lott said.

*—Rich Lamance*

photo by Daren Reehl


***While Senior Airman** Andre Andrews (right) keeps an eye on targets on the battlefield, Staff Sgt. Christopher Avalos calls in a simulated airstrike. The Airmen make up a tactical air control party.*